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### Hannah M. Strømmen, Biblical Animality after Jacques Derrida

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## ***DECONSTRUCTING DOMINION***

Hannah M. Strømme, *Biblical Animality after Jacques Derrida*, Semeia Studies 91 (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2018. \$32.95. pp. xi + 182. ISBN: 978-1-62837-212-0).

Christian care for animals has frequently been grounded in the anthropocentric notion of responsible dominion, with animals as God's gift to humans, who exercise stewardship over them. In deep yet accessible and sometimes allusive dialogue with critical theory, Hannah Strømme boldly deconstructs the consensus that such a view is biblical. Contesting Levinas's identification of the other with a human face, she accepts the challenge to presumed human sovereignty that troubled Derrida when gazed at by his cat. In the Bible, Strømme contends, key texts present an identity crisis in which humans, in the very act of distancing themselves from the animal world, are assimilated back into it.

The four texts discussed are from Genesis, Daniel, Acts and Revelation. The reader is first confronted with Noah: not the pious seafarer of Genesis 8 but the drunken, naked carnivore of Genesis 9. Strømme points to a 'radical tension in the text' (p. 44) resulting from the juxtaposition of the covenant with all life, signified by the rainbow, with the permission granted to eat meat. Noah, of ambivalent human-animal status, himself embodies this tension, being stripped of his purported sovereignty and even consigning his own grandson Canaan into dehumanizing slavery, all against the backdrop of an expanding horizon of justice. The next chapter addresses Acts 10 and Peter's sheet, exposing as superficial the universalism normally supposed by the designation of all the animals as clean. Yet the purpose of this figurative passage is to present all humans as potential Christian converts, rather than to defend the cleanliness of all animals. Indeed, the depiction of the Christian mission to the Gentiles in the terms of the mandated killing and eating of animals should unsettle us, especially if we accept Derrida's replacement of Levinas's commandment not to murder with the more expansive injunction against all killing.

Imagery is prominently discussed in the next two chapters. In Daniel, human sovereign power is presented as bestial via the association of tyrants with animals. Strikingly, King Nebuchadnezzar grazes with oxen until his hair grows 'as long as eagles' feathers' and his nails become 'like bird claws' (Dan. 4.33), with his throne restored only after he recognizes true sovereignty as from God. But animality isn't negative: it provokes the king's repentance, and Daniel, when confined in the lions' pit, is not killed. Moreover, Strømme insists that, in Babylonian tradition, lions signify human adversaries rather than real animals. Finally, in Revelation 17, the images of the horned, scarlet beast, and the blood-drinking whore, whose flesh will be devoured, depict the seduction of sovereignty. The first, an animal becoming human, is ridden by the second, a human becoming animal. The association of the female with the animal is here especially problematic. However, both will be defeated, not by wild brutality nor by sovereign power, but by the legitimate authority of another animal, the lamb.

Strømme's excellently shows us that, where human-animal relations are concerned, what we often consider to be criticism may, in fact, amount to broad endorsement of a comfortable, exclusionary consensus. The origins of modern anthropocentrism, misogyny and violence are frequently traced back to the Bible, with the implication that they are intrinsic to Christian theology. A standard response is to drive a wedge between the Bible and belief. But no text has a single meaning, still less a single reader. Tackling suppositions at their biblical source, Strømme opens suggestive new theological trajectories.

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